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SUBJECT: A PEACE FORUM FOR WARRING PEOPLE OF WARRI

REF: ABUJA 2085

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: ConGen Lagos officers observed the initial meeting of the Warri Forum on Peace, Security, and Human Rights organized by USG grantee Academic Associates PeaceWorks (AAPW) November 18-20 in the Delta State capital of Asaba (reftel). Partially funded through USAID and DRL, the meeting centered on security and use of conflict management tools. Senior representatives of the Nigerian Army, Navy, State Security Service (SSS), Police Force (NPF), and Delta State Government participated alongside Ijaw, Itsekiri, and Urhobo elders and youths. The atmosphere was cordial and discussions were productive, drawing out candid comments from senior GON officials about their operational capabilities and personal feelings. All participants identified weaknesses within themselves and other parties, including shortcomings of the GON, criminal activities of ethnic youths, and the squalid social conditions that fuel violence. Fortunately, all parties brushed aside the locally rooted issues of the ethnic conflict to facilitate discussion and focus on the Forum's main themes. END SUMMARY.

CLOSED LIPPED MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT?

12. (SBU) The Nigerian Army was well represented. Brigadier-General (BG) Elias Zamani, Commanding Officer (CO) of the Joint Task Force (JTF), Operation Restore Hope, attended all sessions of the Forum. He was accompanied by Lieutenant-Colonel (LTC) Goro Dogo, CO of the 7th Army Battalion in Warri; LTC Adamu Lanre, JTF Chief of Operations; and Captain (CPT) O.B. Ogunjimi, CO of the Delta Naval Station in Warri. In response to ECONOFF's remarks about relaxing the curfew in Warri town and its appearance of being under control, BG Zamani pointedly quipped, "No, let's not exaggerate. I have no control. I have the situation contained right now. Containment is all I can hope for until we can pull out. I'll never have control."

13. (SBU) Supporting BG Zamani's statement, LTC Dogo portrayed GON efforts as those of a "fire-brigade," a characterization often repeated during the sessions by security men and Delta residents alike. "We need to go," he said, "beyond control of crises to resolution. Suppression by security forces is not enough and is not long term." Dogo admitted that soldiers and police in the Delta have little outside support and when threatened by militant youths, "my soldiers have the right to flee and protect their lives." Several participants, including other military and GON officials, shared Dogo's concerns, for they openly admitted that the militant youths are better armed and equipped than the JTF, which has little or no capability to project power despite the GON's recent acquisition of former U.S. Coast Guard buoy tenders. In contrast, BG Zamani expressed concern about the international human rights community and its potential criticism of military actions against youths despite the youths having the upper hand. NPF and SSS officials echoed this concern.

THE LONE DEFENDER

14. (SBU) A. Amoo, SSS Director for Delta State, represented the agency at the Forum. Amoo was the only GON official who vigorously tried to defend the GON and its policies. Despite voicing support, Amoo identified unemployment, the mishandling of Delta State elections, federal supremacy, oil company failings, and communities claiming land based on family ties as the causes of the Warri conflict. Amoo blamed the communities for "dis-serving themselves" and called on them to differentiate between problems that can be handled by the communities and those that should reach the federal level. Amoo railed against the media's use of "yellow journalism," exaggerated and inaccurate reports, and accused the media of unprofessional and unethical practices that incite violence and enflame tensions.

KEYSTONE COPS?

15. (SBU) Charles Akaya, Commissioner of Police for Delta State, and his Assistant Commissioner, J.O. Abiona, also attended the Forum. Akaya called for community policing and requested information on criminals and criminal activity, saying that the police cannot act if they do not know what to act upon. When Abiona asked the warring communities to share information if they want to "stop the nonsense," groans and murmurings of disagreement followed his remarks. Akaya recommended creating a state police force, which might forever change the make-up of the centralized national police, believing this move necessary to "secure the communities." The Delta State Attorney General echoed Akaya's calls for a state police force. (COMMENT: Putting the police under the jurisdiction of the states is anathema to the Federal Government. END COMMENT.)

16. (SBU) Akaya also stated that piracy, hostage taking, and bunkering should be checked through community policing as well and stated that such policing should be legalized. (COMMENT: It is unclear whether he advocated vigilantism, as exhibited by the acts of groups like the O'odua People's Congress and the Bakassi Boys who often commit human rights abuses, or a more traditional method of control through a local chief or oga (boss man). At one point Akaya suggested that the problem with the vigilante Bakassi Boys was not that they exist as a sort of militia, but rather that they have been allowed to get out of hand. END COMMENT.)

17. (SBU) Many other participants echoed the call for better law enforcement and prevention, including prosecution of known criminals and illegal bunkerers. "We know who the bunkerers are," cried an Ijaw youth, alluding to unnamed wealthy and influential individuals in Abuja, as well as unidentified international actors. An Itsekiri youth added that crude stolen by youths is resold at substantially higher prices on the international market by these unnamed persons.

WARRING WARRI WARRIORS

18. (SBU) Participants of the three ethnic groups -- the Ijaw, Itsekiri, and Urhobo -- criticized the GON, the Delta State Government, and the oil companies for their plight. Participants claimed that there had been no economic development of any of the riverine areas of the Delta, whether by the Federal and State Governments or the oil companies before the first crisis erupted in 1997. An Ijaw remarked: "The Federal Government doesn't treat Deltans as Nigerians, but as Ijaws, Itsekiris, and Urhobos," and drew a parallel to Rwanda pointing out that not until the crisis was out of control did anyone respond. "The U.N. would do a better job than the Federal Government in the Delta." "People want a sense of belonging, a sense of being a part of a greater community," explained an Ijaw youth.

19. (SBU) An Itsekiri youth echoed that the communities' biggest issues are underdevelopment and poverty. Decrying recourse to the "fire brigade approach to conflict management," an Itsekiri elder criticized the GON's collection and distribution of oil revenues and stated that as long as the GON receives oil revenues, it will not deal with crises in the Delta. If the GON received its funding through taxes, she said, the GON would address the crisis because it could not neglect the issues of the taxpayers. An Ijaw youth voiced support, claiming that if oil revenues had no global or national impact, "no one would pay any attention to us. When Chevron's boats are hijacked, a query comes from on high. When villages are burned and people are killed no one calls us. The system is only interested when money is threatened."

MORE ON THE WARRI FORUM

10. (U) The Warri Forum on Peace, Security and Human Rights was developed by Academic Associates PeaceWorks, under the direction of long-time American resident in Nigeria Judith Burdin-Asuni. Ms. Asuni orchestrated an earlier forum in Warri during the 1999 crisis. The Forum held in November in the Delta State capital of Asaba is part of a four-phase project, partially funded by USAID and DRL.

11. (SBU) COMMENT: The November AAPW Forum held the attention of all and established a record for the quality of the participation by senior GON officials, ethnic leaders, and youths who exercise influence within their communities. Contacts gained through the Warri Forum and other USG initiatives in the Delta have given ConGen Lagos personnel unprecedented access to the actors in the conflict. Although the causes of ethnic conflict in the Delta are complicated and run deep, the Forum creates opportunities for decision-makers to engage in dialogue and cooperation. The next phase of the Forum, ongoing dialogue and attempts to

address the root causes of conflict, will test the mettle of the participants and will give us an indication of how far the protagonists are willing to go for peace. Meanwhile, this program should receive continued support from the USG. END COMMENT.

HINSON-JONES